

Comics: Meet the Artist Joe Martin Cartoonist, "Mr. Boffo"

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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion, hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin. This week, Tobin welcomes Joe Martin of "Mr. Boffo."

Martin will join Tobin online Friday, June 18 at 1 p.m. ET to discuss "Mr. Boffo" and the art of cartooning.

Submit questions either before or during the discussion.

Editor's Note: washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Hello, comics fans, and welcome to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Joe Martin, creator of "Mr. Boffo," as well as "Willy n Ethel" and "Cat With Hands." Martin is joining us from his studio in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Welcome, Joe, and thanks for joining us Live Online.

Joe Martin: It's great to be back in Washington.

Washington, D.C.: Who is the little character in your Boffo strip? What type of animal is he?

Joe Martin: That's Weederman. That's Boffo's dog. Some people think he's a marshmallow, an angel or a piece of a cloud. To me, he's the world, the sensible "us." Weederman observes Boffo's antics and looks

out at the readers who identify with "normal" life, and comments on Boffo's behavior to them. And this creates a bond between Weederman and this minority of readers. In other words, Weederman's the public's conscience.

Manteca, Calif.: Mr Martin,
What is your son, Jay, doing these days? Does he still help out on your strips? Please tell him I always enjoyed his "Tommy" strip and was disappointed it didn't last longer.

Joe Martin: Jay is a director in Hollywood now. He's just directed the Carnival Cruise commercial of the little kid with the TV. He started as a storyboard artist and worked his way up. He's hoping to do a movie soon. I think he was one of the 10 nominees for an award as the best young film director at the last year for some of his commercial work. He's with Anonymous, which is one of the top agencies in Hollywood for directors. I'll pass on your comment about "Tommy." We all liked the strip, but his dream was to be in movies. And he has presented a treatment of "Tommy" as a feature-length film, so that could happen someday.

Bethesda, Md.: I really like your "unclear on the concept" strips. Where do you get your sick sense of humor? Inherited? Environmental trigger?

Joe Martin: I think it's a complex combination of bad DNA or something, at least that's the medical description. My favorite is the one where the optometrist is smashing the patient's head into the eye chart and saying, "There! Does it still look like an A?" The other one is the guy in the police lineup and he, the criminal, is pointing to the lady witness and he's saying "That's her! I'd recognize that purse anywhere."

Washington, D.C.: I found you in the Guinness Book of Records listed as the most prolific cartoonist. How did you get there?

Joe Martin: I wrote 30,000 jokes and had them published. I got the idea to write Guinness when the New Yorker was bragging about one of their cartoonists, Booth, doing the ASTOUNDING amount of 1,400 jokes in his lifetime. And I do that many every year. So Guinness agreed with me and put me in. So I have the New Yorker to thank. Ironically, I do carry a copy of the New Yorker with me every day. I use it for inspiration.

Ballston, Va.: How does an ordinary guy like Earl Boffo consistently land that hot blonde woman? Does she have low self-esteem?

Joe Martin: No, but this is where a cartoonist can do anything he wants. The real truth is its Everyman's dream to have this wild blonde fall for him. She's got no less self-esteem that Blondie, and Boffo's better looking than Dagwood. He's definitely got better hair, and he doesn't have beady eyes.

Chicago, Ill.: Did you have another job when you were starting out? At what point did you find you could support yourself just doing comics?

Joe Martin: I got married at 16, started as a drafstman for a year, which is how I learned to print for the comics. Then I went to work for an employment agency for two years and then started my own agency when I was about 20. By then I had four kids to support. (When I was 18, I had two kids and saw an ad for a resort that said: a vacation package for families where everyone 18 and under was free! So all four of us could have all gone and had a free ride! But I couldn't take off work.)

While I owned an employment agency, I did my first comic strip, "Mr. Tucker," about a man who ran an employment agency. It got syndicated, but the syndicate cancelled it after about a year, ironically enough, on the very day it was voted No. 1 in a comics survey in the Buffalo paper. I self-syndicated it for about a year, but by then I had come up with "Willy n Ethel," and once it was picked up for syndication, I dropped "Mr. Tucker." But I was doing still doing pretty well running the employment agency. So then and But after I created "Porterfield," which is a business comic strip in about 1981 or 1982, I just phased out the employment agency, because I could support my family on just my art work. "Porterfield" did pretty well for about 10 years, but it

was in maybe 100 papers. I've done three comics simultaneously since 1986, when I added "Mr. Boffo" to the roster. Boffo is, by far, the most successful. It's in most of the major markets.

"Willy n Ethel" really made me financially independent and "Porterfield" just made it easier. And "Mr. Boffo" made it fun. All of these comics are available at the mrboffo.com Web site.

Baltimore, Md.: "Willy and Ethel" is one of my favorite strips. Will we ever get to see Ethel's sister?

Joe Martin: No, no, I can't do that. Maybe in a movie. I can never show the sister because my sister thinks they're all about her and she lives in Salisbury, Md., so if I draw the sister, my sister will sue me.

A Person Unclear on the Concept: Are you still doing four strips? How do you keep (for example) your Boffo ideas from contaminating Cats With Hands, or is cross-pollination part of your M.O.? (I'm not suggesting you should stop! The world and the way it would be without Weederman is not a panel I want to see...)

Joe Martin: I'm only currently doing three strips and an online column, Humor Therapy, which just went up on the Web today. You can see it right now of mrboffo.com. It's like Dear Abby meets Mr. Boffo, only instead of Dear Abby I've got Dr. John Carlton. As for cross pollination, sure I do. Last week, I put Willy and Ethel in a Boffo joke.

Chantilly, Va.: Hi Joe: I've been a big fan for years. I have several of your tax-related strips taped to my office door.

Question: where did the name Weederman come from? Dog lovers everywhere demand to know!

Joe Martin: The truth is I thought I made it up. But I was at my original editor's house about five years ago and I heard his wife say goodbye on the phone to somebody named Weederman, who turned out to be

her old boss, so I must have heard it at some point when she was was talking to her boss at the time I was creating Mr. Boffo, and my subconscious probably picked up on it. But, at the same time, I've had at least 100 people who are named Weederman claim that I named the dog after them.

Washington, D.C.: Just so you know, I've taken my kids to the Museum of Homework and Vegetables lots of times, and they love it.

Joe Martin: Either this is a strange coincidence or you're one of the first to read my new column, "Mr. Boffo's Humor Therapy," online. The question in that today dealt with kids who don't want to do their homework. We coupled the Boffo joke with the psychologist's answer, and that's why we call it "Mr. Boffo meets Dear Abby."

Of course, if this IS just a coincidence and you didn't read Humor Therapy, then, to quote Gilda, "Never mind."

Washington, D.C.: Mr. Martin, my sources tell me that you (and not Paul Newman) are the originator of a quote that has become a Princeton ritual ("24-hours- in-a-day, 24-beers-in-a-case"). Care to comment? And have you discussed this with Mr. Newman?

Joe Martin: Mr. Newman wants nothing to do with that. The original joke was in Willy n Ethel, and Willy said "24 hours in a day, 24 beers in a case. Ethel thinks it just a coincidence." A detailed description of everyone involved in the debate over the comic's origin is available in an article on the Philadelphia Inquirer Web site posted on May 12. To make a long story short, I don't think that if I were Paul Newman, I would want anything Willy would say attributed to me.

Arlington, Va.: Why is the little boy in Willy & Ethel their nephew and not their son? Are you trying to allow readers to think that the little boy has some "normal" home to go back to, so that he's not doomed to grow up to be like Willy? Also, is the little boy the child of Ethel's sister, whom we never see but often hear about from Willy?

Joe Martin: I love your explanation and I'd love to use it. You're right on all counts.

We're still building up to the big "Name the Nephew" contest, so hang in there!

Crystal City, Va.: Hello Mr. Martin.

I notice that, the cat in your comic, looks scary, while the dog looks cuddly. Are you a dog lover or cat, which one?

Joe Martin: I never really thought about it. I thought I liked them both.

Washington, D.C.: Do you find it easier to have an open-ended gag format (not restricted to one specific scenario), or is it frustrating that you don't have the reliability of a regular location/style, etc?

Joe Martin: What?

Having to write the three comics simultaneously, the more flexible the comic concept is, the more opportunities for humor and the easier it is to write jokes. I write 26 jokes every week, so I need to be as flexible as possible.

Washington, D.C.: I'm a librarian at a high school and there are several students who love cartooning. Some seem quite talented. Do you have any recommendations for ways they might learn more about it? Are there art schools or camps that might help them develop their talent? Did you start when you were in high school? Any tips for them? Do you ever go to schools to talk about what you do and how you got started?

Joe Martin: The key to my success is that from the time I was 16 I made a rule that every month I would submit something new to some publication. And this is true, when I was 29, I finally got something accepted. It's as easy as that.

Chicago, Ill.: Of all your strips, which is your favorite? And what inspires you?

Joe Martin: Well, that's like saying, what's your favorite kid? And the answer is, of course, the one that makes the most money. So I'd have to say "Mr. Boffo."

What I like about Boffo is that it has no boundaries or limits in terms of subject matter. It's like a baseball player who always has an opportunity to hit a home run.

The challenge is probably the motivation and the reward is a joke that no one has ever done before.

Arlington, Va.: When I was in college in the late 1970's I remember a great comic you created called Tucker. What made you decide to stop writing it? Mr. Boffo is great, all the best to you!

Joe Martin: The syndicate wouldn't distribute it anymore.

Thanks for the compliment.

In the last year, we've been getting a lot of letters about "Tucker," so we are planning on posting an archive of them on the mrboffo.com Web site. It should be up there within the next month.

Arlington, Va.: Please feel free to use my explanation of the nephew however you like. I would be honored. You can even claim the idea as your own. In that case, I would be still be honored, only privately.

Joe Martin: Thank you very much.

Suzanne Tobin: Can you tell us how you find the time to do all these different things when you had a family of five children and 11 grandchildren. Have you just ignored them all?

Joe Martin: I only work six hours a day. And even then, I just write in restaurants and places where I go with my kids and grandkids. Many of my ideas come from just listening to people out in public talking about their kids, or their problems with their pets.

My favorite joke from the kids was inspired by one of their birthday parties, and the joke is: A man is on the witness stand in court and the intro says "World's worst defense award" and the guy is saying "I thought he was a pinata." And that comes directly from the kids at their parties.

Seattle, Wash.: Any relation to Don Martin of Mad Magazine fame?

Joe Martin: No, only that I really enjoyed his work.

Washington: Do you have any advice for an aspiring cartoonist (me)?
Thanks

Joe Martin: Concentrate on the writing. It's 90 percent writing and always keep alot of stamps handy!

Joe Martin: I appreciate the opportunity to explain alot of these jokes. And thanks for the helpful information. And, please, check out "Mr. Boffo's Humor Therapy" on the mrboffo.com Web site. It's the first thing I've ever done that may actually be really helpful to people.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks so much, Joe. We look forward to your continued prolific contributions to helping Americans retain a sense of humor. We're going to take July 2 off for the holiday, and will see you back here on July 16.